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## ABSTRACT

Previous research has consistently demonstrated that variations in physical attractiveness elicit different evaluative and behavioral responses. To assess differences in affective responses to variations in physical attractiveness and the affect of sex on those responses, 76 college students (31 male and 45 female) viewed colored slides of an attractive or unattractive member of the same or opposite sex. The attractiveness classification of the target slides was based on ratings from a pilot study. Subjects then indicated their reaction to the target person on the Impression Formation Index, a seven-point scale. As predicted, physically attractive individuals evoked more favorable affective reactions than did unattractive individuals; this relationship was especially true of opposite sex individuals. For same-sex individuals, unattractive individuals evoked more favorable affective reactions than did attractive individuals. Future research might assess the evaluative, behavioral, and affective dimensions of the physical attractiveness stereotype to determine the extent to which they are related with the affect-attraction theoretical framework. (Author/JAC)

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What is Beautiful Feels Good:  
Affective Reactions to Physical Attractiveness\*

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## Abstract

Previous research has consistently demonstrated that variations in physical attractiveness elicit different evaluative and behavioral responses. The present study was designed to assess differences in affective responses to variations in physical attractiveness. After being exposed to an attractive or unattractive member of the same or opposite sex, male and female subjects indicated the nature of the affective reactions evoked in them by the individual. As predicted, physically attractive individuals evoked more favorable affective reactions than did unattractive individuals; this relationship was especially true of opposite-sex individuals. For same-sex individuals, unattractive individuals evoked more favorable affective reactions than did attractive individuals.

### What is Beautiful Feels Good:

#### Affective Reactions to Physical Attractiveness

One of the more established findings in the person perception literature is the "what is beautiful is good" phenomenon (cf. Berscheid & Walster, 1974; Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). In general, researchers investigating this phenomenon have demonstrated consistently a halo effect associated with physical attractiveness. In this research, the basic procedures typically utilized have involved assessing subjects' evaluative and/or behavioral reactions to target individuals who differ in their level of physical attractiveness.

Research focusing on the evaluative dimension of the "what is beautiful is good" phenomenon has centered around investigating how the target person's level of physical attractiveness serves to influence evaluations of his/her personal attributes and/or performance on a particular task. The results of several studies indicate that observers tend to attribute more desirable qualities to physically attractive individuals than to unattractive individuals (cf. Dion et al., 1972; Miller, 1970). Other studies have found that physically attractive individuals were perceived as having more ability than unattractive individuals in a number of different areas (Anderson & Nida, 1978; Cash, Begley, McCown, & Weise, 1975; Landy & Sigall, 1974). A similar evaluative bias has also been observed with children (Clifford & Walster, 1973; Dion, 1972, 1977).

In addition to identifying an evaluative dimension of this attractiveness bias, research has also documented a behavioral dimension of this

bias as well. The general nature of this behavioral bias is that individuals seem to behave more favorably toward attractive individuals than unattractive individuals. For example, research indicates that physically attractive individuals are more likely to receive help (Benson, Karabenick, & Lerner, 1976), to be the recipient of more intimate disclosures from others (Brundage, Derlega, & Cash, 1977), and to have individuals be more honest with them (Sroufe, Chaikin, Cook, & Freeman, 1977) than unattractive individuals. Finally, as with the evaluative dimension of the attractiveness bias, evidence supporting a behavioral bias in children has also been reported (Dion, 1977).

While the exact direction of the physical attractiveness bias is still being debated (cf. Campbell, 1979; Felson & Bohrnstedt, 1979), the results of a number of studies do seem to indicate a rather consistent evaluative and behavioral dimension of the "what is beautiful is good" phenomenon. Thus, most of the research in the area of physical attractiveness has focused on subjects' evaluative and behavioral responses to individuals who differ in physical attractiveness. However, it is also possible that in addition to eliciting different evaluative and behavioral responses, individuals who differ in physical attractiveness might also elicit different affective reactions as well. More specifically, in addition to the evaluative and behavioral dimensions of the attractiveness stereotype, there also exists the possibility of an affective dimension as well.

Support for the contention that individuals who differ in physical attractiveness might also elicit different affective responses is based on the reinforcement-affect model of attraction (Byrne & Clore, 1970; Clore & Byrne,

1974) and other theoretical frameworks emphasizing the role of affective responses in interpersonal behavior (cf. Griffitt, 1979). According to these affect models of attraction, stimuli which influence attraction elicit affective reactions (Byrne, 1971; Griffitt, 1974). Given that physical attractiveness has also been found to have a significant influence on attraction (cf. Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971; Berscheid & Walster, 1978; Carducci, Cozby, & Ward, 1978), it seems reasonable to assume that different affective reactions should be elicited by individuals who differ in physical attractiveness.

The purpose of the present study was to assess the possible existence of an affective dimension of the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype. More specifically, the present study was designed to examine the possibility that individuals who differ in physical attractiveness might also elicit different affective reactions in others. Based on the reinforcement-affect model of attraction, it was predicted that physically attractive individuals would evoke more favorable affective responses in others than unattractive individuals. This prediction was expected to be particularly true for attractive and unattractive individuals of the opposite sex. However, because being exposed to an attractive member of the same sex might produce feelings of jealousy (cf. Krebs & Adinolfi, 1975), it was expected that affective reactions to an attractive member of the same sex would be less favorable than the affective reactions to an unattractive member of the same sex. Thus, a two-way (Sex of Target X Attractiveness of Target) interaction was predicted.

## Method

### Design and subjects

The design was a 2 x 2 factorial involving the variables of attractiveness of the target person (attractive vs. unattractive) and the sex of the target person with respect to the subject (same- vs. opposite-sex target). The subjects were 31 male and 45 female unmarried students recruited from the Introductory Psychology subject pool who volunteered for an experiment entitled "first impressions" in return for receiving points to be applied to their final grade.

### Procedures

Subjects arrived for the experimental session in mixed-sex groups ranging in size from 8 to 15 members. Upon arrival to the experimental session, the subjects were greeted by a male and female experimenter and given their full experimental participation credit. All of the subjects were then told that the study was concerned with investigating "first impressions." They were told that all that would be expected of them would be to view a color slide of an individual to be projected on the screen and answer a series of questions on an "Impression Formation Index" about the individual in the slide. After being given a description of the procedures to be used in the study, the subjects were asked to sign an informed consent statement, which stated that the subject had been informed of and understood, prior to his/her participation, what the procedures of the experiment would be and that he/she was free to withdraw his/her participation at any time without loss of experimental participation credit. None of the subjects elected to withdraw. The color slide of the target



person was then projected on the screen and remained there until all of the subjects completed their impressions of the target person on the Impression Formation Index.

After completing the Impression Formation Index, the purpose of the experiment was explained thoroughly, all questions were answered, and all subjects were allowed to leave after agreeing not to discuss the experiment with other students.

Attractiveness of the target person manipulation. The target person slide projected on the screen consisted of an attractive or unattractive male or female individual. The attractiveness classification of the target slides was based on ratings made by 14 male and 26 female judges in a pilot study. In the pilot study the judges rated color slides of 23 male and 17 female high-school seniors on a 7-point scale of physical attractiveness (1 = very unattractive to 7 = very attractive). On the basis of the ratings obtained during the pilot study, eight slides with high interjudge reliability were selected as the attractive and unattractive target person slides in the present study. The two male slides ( $M_s = 4.75$  and  $4.65$ ) and the two female slides ( $M_s = 5.53$  and  $5.40$ ) receiving the highest mean attractiveness ratings served as the attractive target person slides. The two male slides ( $M_s = 2.83$  and  $2.33$ ) and the two female slides ( $M_s = 3.32$  and  $2.43$ ) receiving the lowest mean attractiveness ratings served as the unattractive target person slides. An analysis by Newman-Keuls procedures indicated that the mean ratings of the two attractive male and female target slides were significantly different (all  $p_s < .01$ ) from the two unattractive male and female slides. Each one of the eight target person slides was employed equally throughout the experiment.

Dependent measures. The subjects' responses on the Impression Index provided the dependent measures of physical attractiveness and affective reactions. To assess the perceived physical attractiveness of the target person, subjects were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale how attractive, beautiful, and pretty they considered the target person to be. The responses to these three questions were combined to form a measure of perceived physical attractiveness, ranging from 3 (low perceived physical attractiveness) to 21 (high perceived physical attractiveness).

To assess the subjects' affective reactions to the target person, subjects were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale the extent of the affective reaction evoked in them by the target person on six affective dimensions. The six affective dimensions were: pleasant, excited, sexually aroused, affectionate, emotional, and warm. The subjects' responses to all six items were combined to form a measure of affective arousal, ranging from 6 (low affective arousal) to 42 (high affective arousal).

### Results

The subjects' responses to the target person on the physical attractiveness and affective reactions measures were examined in a 2 (attractiveness vs. unattractiveness) x 2 (same- vs. opposite-sex target person) unweighted-means analysis of variance (ns per cell ranging from 14 to 25).

### Manipulation check

The results of an analysis of variance on the perceived physical

attractiveness measure indicated that the subjects evaluated the attractive target person ( $M = 15.24$ ) as being significantly [ $F(1,72) = 47.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ] more attractive than the unattractive target person ( $M = 10.52$ ). No additional main or interaction effects were observed for this measure.

#### Affective reaction measure

The results of an analysis of variance on the affective reaction measure indicated a significant main effect of the attractiveness of the target person and the sex of the target person independent variables. As predicted, the result indicated that the attractive target person evoked more favorable affective reactions in the subjects than did the unattractive target person, the means being 20.87 and 17.58, respectively [ $F(1,72) = 4.33$ ,  $p < .04$ ]. The results also indicated that the target person of the opposite sex evoked more favorable affective reactions in the subjects than the target person of the same sex, the means being 21.98 and 16.47, respectively, [ $F(1,72) = 12.10$ ,  $p < .0009$ ]. However, the interpretation of these two main effects is limited by the presence of the predicted two-way interaction, [ $F(1,72) = 27.80$ ,  $p < .0001$ ]. Cell means for this interaction are given in Table 1.

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 Insert Table 1 about here  
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Internal analysis of the cell means presented in Table 1 was performed using simple-effects procedures (Winer, 1971). The results indicated that the attractive target person of the opposite sex evoked more favorable affective reactions in the subjects than did the unattractive target person

of the opposite sex,  $F(1,72) = 26.86$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, inspection of the cell means in the same-sex target person condition indicated that the unattractive target person evoked more favorable affective reactions in the subjects than did the attractive target person,  $F(1,72) = 5.07$ ,  $p < .05$ . The results for the attractive condition also indicated that the opposite-sex target person elicited more favorable affective reactions than did the same-sex target person,  $F(1,72) = 38.08$ ,  $p < .001$ . The affective reactions elicited by the unattractive target person of the same and opposite sex did not differ significantly,  $F(1,72) = 1.60$ , ns.

### Discussion

The hypothesis that individuals who differ in physical attractiveness would elicit different affective responses was supported. The results of the present study provided evidence suggesting the existence of an affective dimension which is consistent with the previously established evaluative and behavioral dimensions of the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype. However, the nature of this affective bias of the attractiveness stereotype seems to be more compatible with the notion of "what is beautiful feels good."

We are not aware of any other research directly concerned with assessing the affective dimension of the attractiveness stereotype. However, the results of this study are conceptually consistent with a much more comprehensive theoretical framework emphasizing the role of affective reactions in interpersonal behavior (Byrne, 1971, 1977; Byrne & Clore, 1970; Clore & Byrne, 1974; Griffitt, 1979). Future research might involve systematically assessing the evaluative, behavioral, and affective dimensions of the physical attractiveness stereotype to determine the extent

to which they are related in a manner consistent with the affect-attraction theoretical framework. In addition, although the major purpose of the present study was to assess the nature of the affective reactions elicited by individuals who differ in physical attractiveness, future research should also involve assessing the nature of affective reactions elicited by other stimuli which have been found to influence attraction, such as race, age, and personality favorability.

A final comment on the results of this study must be made, and that in the form of a caveat. It should be noted that because the results of the present were obtained within the rather controlled context of reacting to slides of individuals, the contribution of this study may be limited to understanding the role of affective reactions to physical attractiveness as related to first impressions. In an attempt to further understand the role of affective responses in long-term relationships, future research might involve the assessment of affective responses to others during the course of developing relationships. For example, future research might involve assessing the nature of affective reactions as a result of repeated contact with initial strangers who differ in their level of attractiveness. It is possible that the major impact of affective reactions to physical attractiveness will be manifested in the initial stages of the relationships where the nature and the magnitude of these initial affective reactions will help to determine whether or not the individuals will desire to continue with the relationship. However, as the relationship begins to develop, it is possible that the significance of affective reactions to

physical attractiveness will be replaced by positive and/or negative affective reactions elicited by other attributes of the individuals (e.g., a good sense of humor, complementary needs, or similar viewpoints on major issues, to name a few) which play a more significant role in determining the course of more intimate relationships. Thus, future research should attempt to determine the significance of affective reactions to different stimuli as a possible means of better understanding the underlying dynamics of developing and/or terminating relationships.

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Table 1. Mean Affective Reaction Ratings

Sex of Target Person	Attractiveness of Target Person	
	Attractive	Unattractive
Same sex	13.94	19.00
Opposite sex	27.80	16.16

NOTE: Higher scores indicate more favorable evaluations.